Why Fairy Tales Matter: The Performative and the Transformative

Author(s): Maria Tatar

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Why Fairy Tales Matter

The Performative and the Transformative

MARIA TATAR

ABSTRACT

Metamorphosis is central to the fairy tale, which shows us figures endlessly shifting their shapes, crossing borders, and undergoing change. Not surprisingly, stories that traffic in transformation also seek to change listeners and readers in unconventional ways. Bruno Bettelheim revealed to us the therapeutic uses of enchantment, and this essay looks at the cognitive gains made when magical thinking is debunked. KEY WORDS: fairy tales, storytelling, transformation, Brothers Grimm, Wizard of Oz

Fairy tales made a powerful comeback in the United States after Bruno Bettelheim published *The Uses of Enchantment* and endorsed their therapeutic value for children. It is perhaps now time to wonder anew just what those "uses" are today and whether fairy tales still matter to parents and children living in an era when cynicism seems to have driven out wonder and when, even in books for children, the grand narrative style has given way to postmodern pastiche. Today, children may be more familiar with Little Red Running Shorts in *The Stinky Cheeseman and Other Fairly Stupid Fairy Tales* than with the Little Red Riding Hood of the Grimms or Perrault. They may read the *Harry Potter* books, but they will also find themselves riveted by T.M. Anderson's chilling novel *Feed.* Fairy tales have long created potent cocktails of beauty, horror, marvels, violence, and magic, drawing in audiences of all generations over the course of centuries, but adults and children may find them less appealing today than they did even just three decades ago, when Bettelheim's book appeared.

Maria Tatar is the John L. Loeb Professor of German Studies and chairs the Program on Folklore and Mythology at Harvard University.

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Both authors and readers of stories for children are in agreement about the wondrous possibilities opened by a good story. There is not a trace of cynicism in Lois Lowry's view about the transformative experience of reading. "Each time a child opens a book," she declares, "he pushes open the gate that separates him from Elsewhere. It gives him choices. It gives him freedom. Those are magnificent, wonderfully unsafe things" (Lowry 2001). In a memoir called *The Child That Books Built*, Francis Spufford writes eloquently about "someplace else":

> I wanted there to be a chance to pass through a portal, and by doing so to pass from rusty reality with its scaffolding of facts and events into the freedom of story. I wanted there to be doors. If, in a story, you found the one panel in the fabric of the workaday world that was hinged, and it opened, and it turned out that behind the walls flashed the gold and peacock blue of something else . . . all possibilities would be renewed. (Spufford 2002:85)

Fairy tales have that very capacity captured by Lowry and Spufford to serve as portals to wonder worlds, to sites that combine danger and beauty in ways so alluring that they inspire the desire to wander into new imaginative domains. They enable us to "subjunctivize," to explore the "might be, could have been, perhaps will be" (Bruner 2002:20). They open up a theater of possibilities and create an unparalleled sense of immediacy, at times producing somatic responses with nothing but words. In the enchanted world of fairy tale, anything can happen, and what happens is often so startling, magical, and unreal that it often produces a jolt. Shape-shifting, as Marina Warner has pointed out, is one of the defining features of fairy tales, and it happens in ways that invariably contradict the laws of nature:

> Hands are cut off, found and reattached, babies' throats are slit, but they are later restored to life, a rusty lamp turns into an all-powerful talisman, a humble pestle and mortar becomes the winged vehicle of the fairy enchantress Baba Yaga, the beggar changes into the powerful enchantress and the slattern in the filthy donkeyskin into a golden-haired princess. (Warner 1994:xix)

The transformative power of fairy tales can be approached from a variety of angles, and I want to propose first analyzing how the stories themselves function as shape-shifters, morphing into new versions of themselves as they are retold and as they migrate into other media. The tales in the Grimms' collection have been inflected in so many new

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ways that they have become part of a global storytelling archive drawn upon by many cultures. Fairy tales also have transformative effects on us, and when we read and hear them, they can produce vertiginous sensations—not just the therapeutic energy that Bettelheim identified. Finally, the transformative magic in fairy tales—their spells, curses, and charms—lead to metamorphoses that enact the consequences of magical thinking. And yet the transformation of beasts into princes or boys into hedgehogs, as children quickly learn, is possible only in the world of stories. Even as fairy tales ultimately debunk magical thinking, showing that it works only in the realm of story, they also affirm the magical power embedded in language, the way that the ability to use words can grant a form of agency unknown to the child who has not yet fully developed the capacity to use language.

The Grimms' *Children's Stories and Household Tales* has transformed itself from a record of local culture into a global archive. German folklore migrated first to England when Edgar Taylor published *German Popular Stories* (1823) with such fanfare that the collection of Grimms' tales came to establish itself as the authoritative source of tales disseminated across many cultures—British, Scottish, and Irish. To the great consternation of Joseph Jacobs, a prominent collector of British and Irish folklore, the Grimms' versions of fairy tales were supplanting native lore. Lamenting the fact that he was a latecomer to the project of collecting tales from "the lips of the people," he despaired of becoming the British answer to the Grimms. "What Perrault began," Jacobs grumbled, "the Grimms completed. Tom Tit Tot gave way to Rumpelstiltschen [*sic*], the three Sillies to Hansel and Grethel, and the English Fairy Tale became a *mélange confus* of Perrault and the Grimms" (Jacobs 1986:289).

For all of Jacobs' efforts to collect native lore and to move it into a dominant position in England, tales like "Rumpelstiltskin" and "Hansel and Gretel" had already taken root in British lands and tenaciously maintained their hold not only on British children and adults, but on children the world over. It may be true that Perrault's "Cinderella," with its fairy godmother who turns a pumpkin into a coach, conquered the Grimms' "Aschenputtel," with its lurid descriptions of toes and heels sliced off and eyes pecked out, but the Grimms' "Rotkäppchen" and many other tales triumphed over their French and British counterparts. Perrault's "Le petit chaperon rouge," with its violent ending that puts a wolf (with his appetite slaked) on display, could simply not compete with the Grimms' version, which staged the rescue of the girl by a hunter.

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The Grimms seem here to stay, and yet, what we find of Grimm and of fairy tales in the United States seems often to take the form of cultural debris, fragments of once powerful narratives that find their way into our language to produce colorful turns of phrase. In the media, we read about a Goldilocks economy, about the Emperor's new clothes, and about Sleeping Beauty stocks. In popular send-ups of the classic plots, the purpose is usually to mock the values found in the earlier variants, whether it is the virtue of selfless industry or a lack of vanity. Julia Roberts plays a latter-day Cinderella who moves from rags to Rodeo Drive riches in *Pretty Woman.* Anne Sexton gives us a Snow White who is described as both "dumb bunny" and "lovely virgin" as she falls into her comatose state (2001:3,8). Not surprisingly, a parodic idea of wonder also gets enlisted to promote consumerist fantasies. In a commercial, Kim Cattrall makes her way through the cobblestone streets of Prague, wearing a red dress, red-hooded cape, and red heels in search of a man with the good taste to drink Pepsi. This modern "use" of fairy tales depends on undercutting precisely their original power to give us a bite of reality, to confront us with monsters that seize us and sink their teeth into our most vulnerable parts.

And yet the raw emotional power of the originals remains with us today, even as the fairy tale migrates into new media. In *The Brothers Grimm,* the filmmaker Terry Gilliam gets us back to the terror and beauty of the Grimms' tales, with his mirror queen, whose beautiful face shatters into pieces before our eyes, and with his gingerbread man, a gob of primal muck that emerges from a well to revel in chthonic glory as he swallows a child. Little Red Riding Hood may now be mobilized to sell Revlon lipstick and Hertz rental cars, but the story of Snow White still has the power, even in the Disney version, to affect us in disturbing ways. Alan Turing, the brilliant mathematical logician who played a pivotal role in breaking German codes during World War II, was a great fan of Disney's *Snow White.* He was said to have chanted from memory the couplet: "Dip the apple in the brew / Let the Sleeping Death seep through." Shortly after the British government "rewarded" Turing for his brilliant work in cryptography by giving him hormone injections to "cure" his homosexuality, he committed suicide by biting into a poisoned apple injected with cyanide (Goldstein 2005:252).

Cinderella haunts the cinematic imagination in what appears as an astonishing repetition compulsion in films like *Pretty Woman, Ever After, Working Girl, Two Weeks Notice, Maid in Manhattan, The Prince and Me, The Princess Diaries,* and *Ella Enchanted.* In high culture, as in popular

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culture, fairy-tale plots undergird the work of photographers (as in Cindy Sherman's illustrations for *Fitcher's Bird*), of musicians (as in Philip Glass and Robert Moran's *The Juniper Tree*), and of writers (as in Angela Carter's rescriptings of fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber*). The Grimms' tales seem to have a ubiquitous cultural presence, even if they appear adapted, refashioned, reconfigured, and often profoundly reinvented.

Even as fairy tales transform themselves, they seek transformative effects, producing what Graham Greene refers to as "excitement and revelation." In an essay on childhood reading, Greene considered how nothing that we read after the age of fourteen has the same staying power (Greene 1961:13). Fairy tales have the power to elicit what Richard Wright has described as a "total emotional response." In *Black Boy*, an autobiography of growing up in the Jim Crow South, Wright evokes the memory of having "Bluebeard and His Seven Wives" (a fairy tale whose implied audience is clearly adults) read to him by a schoolteacher named Ella: "My imagination blazed. The sensations the story aroused in me were never to leave me. ... I hungered for the sharp, frightening, breathtaking, almost painful excitement that the story had given me" (Wright 1993:39). Like so many young fairy-tale protagonists, Wright found himself experiencing a shudder of pleasure and fear, standing "at the gateway to a forbidden and enchanting land" (40). And it was literally forbidden: Ella, who was boarding at his house, sneaked the story in, but this was long before Bettelheim had enlightened Americans about the therapeutic power of fairy tales to strengthen young superegos. For Wright, the maturational effect was a sound beating (Wright's grandmother denounced the tale as "devil's work") and a lifelong engagement with stories, whose power to change us—not least by frightening us into imagining alternate realities—had once overwhelmed him. Wright's experience gives us pause about our endless efforts to invent child-friendly fairy tales. Were our ancestors on to something when they included children in their communal storytelling practices?

Wright took something else from "Bluebeard" in addition to what might have been a short-lived "total emotional response." The story opened an important portal: "I burned to learn to read novels and I tortured my mother into telling me the meaning of every strange word I saw, not because the word itself had any value, but because it was the gateway to a forbidden and enchanting land" (Wright 1993:40). The excitement of the story is not in any sense escapist. The words with which it is told, in the end, furnish an escape into the opportunity offered by access to

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language. Every word becomes a source of wonder, a gateway to the discovery of adult knowledge and words, a land that provides opportunity through an understanding of the words used by adults.

The idea of personal transformation emerges logically from a genre that draws ceaselessly on shape-shifting and metamorphosis. Donald Ward understood exactly how key narrative can be in conditions of deep crisis and personal turmoil, and he explored the therapeutic power of telling tales (Ward 1990). It is no accident that the fairy tale chosen by the Grimms to open their collection was "The Frog King," a story in which a curse turns a prince into a frog and a gesture of vehement rage reverses the curse ("Now you'll get your rest," [Tatar 2004:10] the princess shouts as she tosses the unrelenting suitor against the wall). Here, it is not compassion, as in "Beauty and the Beast," that turns a monster back into a human, but an act of passion, in all its bold intensity.

Transformation is at the heart of magical practices, and the poet Ted Hughes has described the momentum behind metamorphosis as passion that "combusts or levitates—mutates into an experience of the supernatural" (Hughes1999:ix-x). The outburst of passion is rarely silent, and words invariably accompany and express the rage, desire, and fear that work together with language to produce transformative effects. It was exactly those effects that, for Margaret Atwood, made her childhood reading of fairy tales so powerful. In recalling a youth spent reading an unexpurgated copy of the Grimms' fairy tales, she declared that, above all else, the stories taught her to value language—not only to learn the "meaning of every strange word," as Wright did, but also to understand the full depth of each word's power: "And where else could I have gotten the idea, so early in life, that words can change you?" (Atwood 1993:292)

The curses, spells, and charms in the Grimms' collection are the most obvious examples of the power of language to effect change in the physical world. These phrases are connected to what J.L. Austin called performative utterances in his landmark work entitled *How To Do Things with Words.* He then broke down these utterances into illocutionary and perlocutionary operations, the former producing actual deeds and the latter leading to emotional effects. Ruth B. Bottigheimer refers to Austin's concept of the performative in her study of spells in the Grimms' tales, but she limits her analysis to the "invocation of a natural force followed by a command" (Bottigheimer 1987:40-50). When the Goose Girl, for example, invokes the wind, she names it as a force and directs to it a command: "Blow, winds, blow, / Send Conrad's hat into the air" (Tatar 2004:315). Or when Aschenputtel stands before a tree in the garden of

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her home, she issues a command that is fulfilled: "Shake your branches, little tree / Toss gold and silver down on me" (Tatar 2004:122).

The curses, spells, and charms of fairy tales are far removed from what Austin describes as the performative, for they have the unprecedented power to create real *physical* change, not just the power to perform rituals that produce a change in legal or official status or to persuade, support, or discourage. It may be true that we talk about language as having somatic effects (words can "wound" or have the power to "assault" us), but, in fact, it is only in fairy tales that they are endowed with the capacity to produce real physical change.

Magical thinking is enacted nowhere more successfully than in fairy tales, and that thinking inevitably finds its way into words. Change comes less through the force of magic wands than through spells, words that promise to create changes. The enchantress in the Grimms' "Jorinda and Joringel" uses words in order to turn girls into birds. For food to appear in abundance, the hero has to use the words "Table, set yourself" (Tatar 2004:172). And Brother Lustig has the power to revive the dead, but he can only do so by pronouncing the words "Get up!" (Zipes 1992:273). The curses, spells, charms, and wishes of fairy-tale fantasy show the power of mind over matter and the force of naming a condition to change reality. And yet, they also reveal that it is only *in* the tale that words have the power to enchant or disenchant. The magical spells uttered by witches, enchantresses, and ogres lose their effect when they cross over into reality. The phrase "Open Sesame!", as children quickly discover, works only in the fairy tale. When it migrates into a real-world context, it loses the capacity to open doors.

And yet, Margaret Atwood tells us that enchantment has its uses, and one of those uses for her had to do with learning about the *power* of words. How do we square Atwood's understanding of the lesson communicated by fairy tales to her as a child with the hard fact that children quickly discover that the transformative power of language works only in the fairy tale and not outside the story? For the answer to that particular question, let us enter a different cultural climate, one that built on the oral storytelling traditions recorded by the Grimms but also developed a self-reflexive literary quality that reveals much about what was at stake in those earlier traditions.

In his preface to *The Wizard of Oz*, L. Frank Baum claimed to have written a "modernized fairy tale" in which all the "horrible" and "bloodcurdling" incidents of the old-time European fairy tales of Grimm and Andersen were happily eliminated (Baum 1960:1). *The Wonderful Wizard*

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of Oz, as its title first read, sought to preserve the wonder and joy of the old-style fairy tale, leaving out its "heart-aches" and "nightmares." This is the very book that famously gave not only a name but also life to the "lions, tigers, and bears, oh my!" that haunt every child's imagination. The tale derives its emotional intensity from a Manichean universe in which a small and meek Dorothy Gale defeats the forces of evil—without the distractions of weighty moral considerations—and secures for herself the power to return home.

To get back to Kansas, Dorothy does more than just click her heels. In the chapter titled "The Magic Art of the Great Humbug," the girl from the Great Plains becomes aware that the real power of the wizard resides in his ability to do things with words, to endow the Scarecrow with "bran-new" brains, to "fill" the Lion with courage, and to make a heart for the Tin Woodman. Even as Baum used a fairy tale to debunk magic and to reveal that it is produced by a Great Humbug who creates the illusion of mystery, he also affirmed the magic of language, the power to do things with words. The Scarecrow gains confidence; the Lion becomes stalwart; and the Tin Woodman is endowed with the power to love. Dorothy faces a greater challenge, as the Wizard acknowledges: "It will take more than imagination to carry Dorothy back to Kansas, and I'm sure I don't know how it can be done" (Baum 1960:199). But Dorothy has learned from observation, and when she wants to return to Kansas, she not only puts on the silver shoes, but also utters the words: "Take me home to Aunt Em!" (Baum 1960:258).

A force of nature in the form of a cyclone takes Dorothy Gale (note the way that an uncontainable natural force is embedded in her name) to Oz, but Dorothy uses her own feet and words to return home. "Take me home to Aunt Em!" may appear to be an innocent and innocuous declaration, but, in uttering those words, Dorothy affirms that she can inaugurate an action, that she has mastered the adult codes of Austin's performative utterances as modified by Jacques Derrida, who makes it clear that the power of language derives from linguistic conventions of authority: "Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a 'citation'?" (Derrida 1988:18).

The magic art of the wizards, witches, and enchantresses in fairy tales may be embedded in what Austin and Searle call "parasitic language" (figurative or poetic language) and can therefore be considered entirely

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exempt from considerations of agency. But whatever we believe when it comes to the agency of a subject vs. the agency of language, it is obvious that language is a name for what we do and what we effect (Butler 2006:8). And when Dorothy, small and meek, discovers that the Wizard's power can be imitated, cited, and appropriated, she has also developed the power to act as the agent in her own rescue and return to Kansas.

The child reading fairy tales enters Elsewhere to learn language and master the linguistic conventions that allow adults to do things with words, to produce effects that are achieved by saying something. For children, all adults possess wizardry in their control over symbolic forms of expression—they can create illusions, effect changes, and take on agency through words. The child reading a book, by learning about the magic art of the Great Humbug, can begin to move from the childhood condition of lacking the words needed to name, describe, and define what affects us. Fairy tales help children move from that disempowered state to a condition that may not be emancipation but that marks the beginnings of some form of agency.

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